

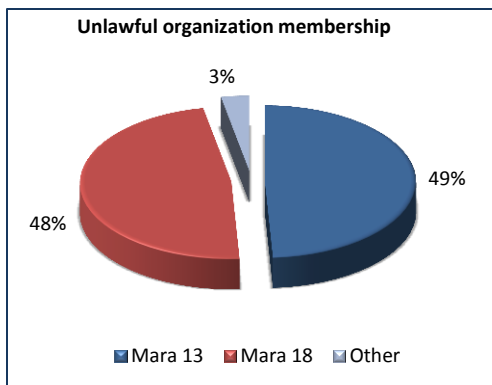


USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

HONDURAS

SNAPSHOT Deconstructing Gang Structures & Operations

Organized roundtables create a space for analysis with gang sympathizers and former gang members.



Source: "Situación de Maras y Pandillas en Honduras, Junio de 2012"

"The way we are structured is a sensitive issue because it involves great risk ... including events that have impacted the life of individuals who are not ready to talk about it."

*--Roundtable participant**

*Due to the extremely sensitive nature of internal gang structures and operations, names are withheld to minimize participant risk.

November 2012 – A June 2012 report from the National Program for Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Social Reinsertion (*Programa Nacional de Prevención, Rehabilitación, y Reinserción Social - PNPRRS*) stated that there are 4,728 children and youth identified as active gang members in Honduras, 97 percent of whom belonging to the Mara Salvatrucha-13 (MS-13) or Barrio 18. This report contrasts with the typically-cited number of 35,000 total gang members. The gangs' control over the majority of the country's territory is increasingly alarming as their criminal activities extend beyond extortion and create perceptions of widespread insecurity in Honduran communities.

To inform disruption strategies against gang-generated violence, understanding the organizational structures and operating mechanisms that drive criminal and violent activities is critical. USAID/OTI issued a grant to *Fundación Unidos por la Vida*, an organization with experience rehabilitating former gang members, to host two roundtable discussions with gang sympathizers and former gang members in San Pedro Sula. During both roundtables, participants provided insight into the different underlying hierarchies, rules, and power structures of the two largest gangs in Honduras.

The 18 participants included 10 gang sympathizers and 8 former gang members from some of the most dangerous areas of San Pedro Sula: Planeta, López Arellano, and Chamelecón. Their experiences ranged from growing up in insecure communities to the day-to-day struggles they face to reintegrate into society after leaving the gangs, and the risks they shouldered in coming forward to discuss these sensitive, exclusive, and dangerous topics with outsiders.

During the two discussions, participants alluded to a possible lifelong pact dictating what information can and cannot be shared after leaving the gang. Participants discussed the relationships between communities, stressing that the gangs in their neighborhoods were well-regarded due to the protection they provide, and that the community appreciates the respectful behavior of the gang members. They commented on structural differences (not described) within the two most prominent regional gangs (MS-13 and Barrio 18), highlighting an area for further research. Both gangs are evolving, becoming more organized and establishing new systems of operations, communications, and finances. Many of these changes stem from an increase in profits through extortion, and are increasingly reinforced through linkages to drug trafficking. As a result, gangs have strengthened their power and territorial control, and have greater access to weapons and funding through connections with other organized criminal groups.

Telling Our Story

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